

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WALL STREET JOURNAL
13 February 1987

Ship Used to Send Arms to Contras Said To Aid Delivery of East-Bloc Arms to U.S.

By JOHN WALCOTT
And DAVID ROGERS

Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—East is east and west is west. But in the shadowy world of the international arms trade, sometimes the twain meet.

According to Reagan administration sources and records on file with the U.S. Customs Service, a small freighter which was used to deliver arms to anti-communist Nicaraguan rebels also helped carry Soviet-bloc weapons from Poland to the U.S. for the Defense Department or the Central Intelligence Agency.

According to sources and shipping records, the freighter Erria delivered a load of Soviet AK-47 automatic rifles that had been purchased in Poland to the French port of Cherbourg last Sept. 13. The weapons then were transferred to another freighter, the Iceland Saga, which delivered them on Oct. 8 to Wilmington, N.C., where records list the Defense Department as the recipient of the cargo.

A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment on the shipment, but U.S. military and intelligence sources said Soviet bloc weapons purchased in Eastern Europe by front companies and other middlemen routinely are shipped through the North Carolina port.

The CIA often supplies insurgent groups it supports with Soviet-bloc weapons, often with their serial numbers removed, so the arms don't appear to have come from the U.S. "Legitimate buys of Soviet-bloc weapons often come in there," said one official.

Intelligence sources said the CIA maintains a warehouse of such weapons. The Defense Department keeps its own stockpile of East bloc arms, Pentagon officials said.

U.S. officials said Poland and other East European nations routinely sell weapons to the West through intermediaries, even though the weapons may be destined for anti-communist forces, U.S. intelligence officials said.

"The Poles pretty well know where the weapons are going, or they suspect it," said one U.S. official. "But usually they don't care; they're not in it for political reasons, they're in it to earn hard currency."

Arming anti-communist guerrillas with Polish weapons can be risky, however. On one occasion, intelligence sources said, the Poles sold defective SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles to a buyer who shipped the weapons to rebels fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Because some ceramic parts had been substituted for metal ones, the sources said, the weapons proved worthless.

The Erria's involvement in Contra arms shipments began in the summer of 1985, according to intelligence sources. Thomas Parlow, a shipping agent in Denmark, has confirmed that the Erria picked up cargo from Portugal for Honduras that summer. Mr. Parlow subsequently purchased the ship from its previous Danish owners last spring and the vessel is currently registered under the name of a Panamanian corporation that he says he controls.

Mr. Parlow is a longtime friend of Thomas Clines, an ex-CIA agent and close associate of retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, a major figure in the Iran-Contra affair. Mr. Clines assisted Gen. Secord in shipping arms to the Contras, but he is widely considered unwelcome by his former CIA colleagues because of his involvement with renegade CIA agent Edwin Wilson, who has been jailed for selling explosives to Libyan leader Col. Moammar Gadhafi.

Intelligence sources have said Mr. Clines and Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the fired National Security Council aide, used the Erria last spring in an unsuccessful attempt to free U.S. hostages in Lebanon with a ransom put up by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot. Mr. Parlow has confirmed that the Erria was off Cyprus at about the time of the planned exchange.

Last May, less than five months before the arms shipment from Poland to North Carolina, the CIA rejected a proposal from Lt. Col. North that it use the Erria to broadcast anti-Gadhafi propaganda—including claims that the Libyan leader had lost control and that opposition groups were moving to oust him—to Libyans living on the country's coast.

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